

# Education funding a work in progress, legislature says

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BELLEVUE, Wash. (AP) — The Legislature's annual progress report to the Washington Supreme Court on its work toward fulfilling the court's order to fix education funding is a mixture of accomplishments and wishes for the future.

The report approved Tuesday begins with a summary of the court's 2012 McCleary decision, which said lawmakers weren't meeting their constitutional responsibility to fully pay for basic education. It details the \$4.8 billion added to the state education since the ruling.

The report checks off many boxes in the McCleary ruling, including all-day kindergarten, classroom supplies and smaller classes in kindergarten through third grade. It talks about a boost in education spending of about \$1.3 billion over the next two years, raises for teachers and more money for school construction.

But on other, likely more expensive McCleary-related issues — including the reform of local tax levies and school pay — the report offers ideas and proposed bills but no action.

Last fall, the Supreme Court said the state was in contempt for not making plans to completely answer its orders. The court is expected to decide soon whether to sanction the Legislature.

In the report, lawmakers acknowledge they have not completed the work the court asked them to do, specifically writing a plan for how they will finish their assignment.

But many of the lawmakers on the committee assigned to report to the Supreme Court — the Joint Select Committee on Article IX Litigation — said they believe they will be

able to finish their work before the end of the next legislative session, which begins in January 2016.

“I think we’ve got buy-in from Democrats and Republicans on the outline,” said Rep. Ross Hunter, D-Medina. The rest of the work involves figuring out how to pay for it, Hunter added.

One Senate estimate of the cost of compensation reform was \$3.5 billion. The cost of implementing class-size Initiative 1351 has been estimated at about \$2 billion. Most agree that \$5.5 billion is part of the total McCleary dollars.

Turning some, or even all, of the revenue from local property tax levies into a state education tax won’t be enough to cover the bill. The final agreement will require another source of money, many Democrats and Republicans in the Legislature have said.

Rep. Chad Magendanz, R-Issaquah, said it’s important that whatever source of money they use be stable. Magendanz said his first choice was moving local levy money into the state budget, but he acknowledged property taxes won’t be enough to pay the whole bill.

But Sen. David Frockt, D-Seattle, who noted he voted for the report reluctantly, said a complete property tax swap may not be doable.

“I don’t think it can be done in a revenue-neutral way and be politically acceptable,” Frockt said.

He referred to the way some proposals would take tax dollars away from the bigger, richer school districts like Seattle and redistribute them around the state. “That’s why there’s no grand agreement,” Frockt said.

If the talk among lawmakers after the meeting adjourned at the Bellevue Public Library is any indication of how close they are to finishing the work, they still have a ways to go.